

Iran's Foreign Ministry Spokesman Esmail Baghaei Says Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' Al Sudani Will Visit the Islamic Republic Next Week to Talk With Iranian Officials

IRAN NEWS

Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister for Political Affairs Majid Takht Ravanchi Will Pay a Two-Day Visit to India on Thursday for the 19th Round of Political Negotiations Between the Two Countries

VOL. XXIX, No. 8171 TEHRAN Price 50,000 Rials

www.irannewsdaily.com

THURSDAY JANUARY 02, 2025 DEY 13, 1403

2 DOMESTIC



Iran-Pakistan Trade Opportunities Discussed

> SEE PAGE 2

3 INTERNATIONAL

Revellers Across the World Welcome 2025 With Spectacular Fireworks



> SEE PAGE 3

Manama Continues Coordination With Tehran Aimed at Restoration of Ties



MANAMA (Dispatches) - The Bahraini Ministry of Foreign Affairs has announced that it is continuing coordination with its Iranian counterpart aimed at reconciliation between Manama and Tehran and restoration of diplomatic ties between the two Muslim countries.

The ministry announced in a statement that Bahrain pursues a balanced approach in its foreign policy, on the basis of defending its sovereignty and independence, serving the Persian Gulf kingdom's national interests, and enhancing its regional and international standing.

The kingdom also adheres to the principles of good neighborliness and non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, and focuses on promoting relations and consolidating cooperation and dialogue through mutual respect and common understanding, the Bahraini foreign ministry said.

It added that Manama, in accordance with the lofty directives of King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, and the continuous follow-up of Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, the Crown Prince and Prime Minister, attaches great importance to its diplomatic relations with all countries.

The Bahraini Ministry of Foreign Affairs noted that it will continue coordination with its Iranian counterpart in order to establish the necessary legal frameworks to restore diplomatic relations between the two countries, stating that the mutual visits between the two sides have contributed to reaching an agreement on resuming talks aimed at restoring bilateral relations between the two countries.

The ministry also stressed the need to adhere to the basic principles of international relations and good neighborliness, which are essential to maintaining the stability and economic prosperity of the West Asia region.

Bahrain followed Saudi Arabia's suit and severed diplomatic relations with Iran on January 4, 2016, after Iranian protesters, enraged by the execution of prominent Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr Baqir al-Nimr by the Saudi government, stormed its diplomatic mission in Iran.



Leader Hails Martyr Soleimani's Sacrifices to Revitalize Resistance Front

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

Tehran, Iran - On the occasion of the fifth martyrdom anniversary of General Qassem Soleimani's assassination, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, emphasized the enduring impact of Soleimani's strategy to revitalize the "Resistance Front."

The commemorative event was held at the Imam Khomeini Hosseiniyeh in Tehran, with high-ranking officials, dignitaries, and thousands of participants paying tribute to the late general. The ceremony began with the recitation of Quranic verses and included poetry readings by Mojtaba Ramazani.

In his address, Ayatollah Khamenei reflected on Soleimani's legacy, highlighting his unyielding dedication to defending Islamic sanctities and his pivotal role in countering foreign aggression in the region.

During his remarks, the Supreme Leader described General Soleimani's global respect as a testament to his sincerity and devotion. "The tomb of Martyr Soleimani is visited by thousands from far and wide, even from other countries. This respect is God's worldly reward for his pure-heartedness," he said.

The Supreme Leader elaborated on Soleimani's strategic mission: "His constant goal was the revival of the Resistance Front. General Soleimani was instrumental in reinvigorating the collective defense of oppressed nations and sacred values across the Islamic world."

Ayatollah Khamenei recounted Soleimani's critical intervention in Iraq during the early stages of foreign invasions. "At a time when Najaf and other Iraqi cities like Karbala, Kadhimayn, and Baghdad were under threat, a small group of young men stood defenseless in Najaf. They lacked proper weapons and even food. Soleimani, sensing his duty, established contact and provided support, helping to save them," he said.

The Leader also commended the significant role of Iraqi religious authorities during the crisis but underscored Soleimani's leadership in initiating and organizing the early resistance.

Ayatollah Khamenei stressed that the defense of sacred Islamic sites was a core principle for

Fuel Smuggling: A National Crisis and Evidence of Inefficiency



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - President Masoud Pezeshkian described the daily smuggling of tens of millions of liters of fuel as a "disaster" and undeniable evidence of inefficiency. Speaking on Tuesday, December 31, 2024, during a meeting of the National Headquarters for Combating Goods and Currency Smuggling, he emphasized his commitment to reforming the nation's governance, regardless of electoral implications.

Addressing the crisis, Pezeshkian stated, "As both the President and an Iranian citizen, I find it unacceptable that 20 to 30 million liters of fuel, which are produced and distributed under our own supervision, are smuggled daily." He criticized long-term solutions as ineffective, urging the development of practical measures to resolve the issue swiftly.

The President underscored the importance of addressing the root causes of smuggling rather than targeting individuals involved in its final stages, which could exacerbate social issues. He tasked the National Headquarters for Combating Goods and Currency Smuggling with conducting a comprehensive analysis of the problem within one month, dividing the issue into specific sectors and proposing actionable solutions in collaboration with experts.

"Universities and students, uninfluenced by vested interests, can provide objective insights and innovative strategies," Pezeshkian added, emphasizing the importance of leveraging academic resources to tackle the crisis.

He also stressed that all government agencies must take proactive steps to prevent the waste of national resources. He called for a thorough review of fuel allocation systems to identify inactive units, inefficient operations, and misuse of subsidized fuel. "I am confident that we can stop this form of wealth smuggling and waste through tested scientific methods and optimal fuel management strategies," he affirmed.

The session included a detailed report on the scale, routes, and underlying causes of the daily fuel smuggling. Relevant organizations presented their analyses and proposed countermeasures.

U.S. Has Provided Over \$22b to Israel's Military Since Oct. 2023



WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - The United States has provided the Israeli regime with more than \$22 billion in military support since last October, when Tel Aviv launched its war of genocide on the Gaza Strip.

The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) provided the staggering figure in a report on Tuesday, saying the US had supplied the weaponry for the perpetration of aggression across the West Asia region, including in Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria.

Throughout 2023, Washington's military patronage for Tel Aviv rose by a whopping 78 percent. The four-year-long period preceding it saw the former furnishing 69 percent of the regime's military hardware.

Just throughout the 23 days that followed the onset of the regime's brutal military assault against Gaza and its concomitant escalated deadly aggression towards Lebanon, the US outfitted the regime with upwards of 10,000 tons of weapons worth \$2.4 billion.

The number grew to 50,000 tons by August 2024. The arms were transported to the regime using hundreds of planes and ships.

The hardware ran the gamut of deadly weapons, including missiles for the regime's Iron Dome system, precision-guided bombs, CH-53 heavy lift helicopters, AH-64 Apache helicopters, and 155mm artillery shells, along with bunker-busting munitions and armored vehicles.

The unstinting arms flow came while the war went on to claim the lives of more than 45,500 Palestinians, mostly women and children, namely six percent of Gaza's population, and the aggression against Lebanon killed more than 3,960 people.

Enemies Have Yet to Witness Iran's True Power



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - The Commander-in-Chief of the Iranian Army has stated that enemies have not yet seen the full extent of Iran's power, emphasizing that resistance is a mindset and culture that has only grown stronger, especially following the "Al-Aqsa Storm" operation.

Speaking at the nationwide Air Force Training and Education Conference held at the Air Force Headquarters on Wednesday, January 1, 2025, Major General Seyed Abdolrahim Mousavi remarked, "Tomorrow marks the anniversary of the martyrdom of General Qassem Soleimani, a brave warrior who dedicated his life to lofty ideals and was ultimately martyred by one of the most ruthless entities within the U.S. hegemonic regime."

General Mousavi dismissed claims that the resistance movement is weakening, stating, "Enemies aim to project the notion that resistance has diminished. Those who make such claims misunderstand the nature of resistance, viewing it as a mechanical structure that can break or collapse. Resistance, however, is an ideology and culture that cannot be weakened. On the contrary, since the Al-Aqsa Storm operation, it has become more robust, widespread, and deeply rooted, as evidenced by the thoughts of people in the region and across the world."

He further noted that this enduring mindset is being passed down to future generations, likening the children growing up under current conditions to future leaders of resistance, such as Yahya Sinwar. "This ideology will not vanish," he asserted.

Highlighting the significance of military training, General Mousavi emphasized its integral role in progress and success. "Education and training are interconnected and essential," he said, praising the bravery of Iranian Air Force pilots who have declared their readiness to counter threats from the Zionist regime.

The Commander-in-Chief criticized enemy narratives about Iran's military capabilities, asserting, "We have not yet revealed our full military strength. Many of our capabilities remain undisclosed, and there is no reason to expose them prematurely. For example, we showcased only one underground drone base, the location of which still eludes our adversaries."

He added, "If we ever decide to play this 'ping-pong game,' it will be on our terms, and that day will reveal Iran's true power."

Addressing the ongoing conflict, General Mousavi rejected claims of Zionist victories, stating, "Killing women and children, destroying hospitals, homes, and schools, and targeting civilians is not a victory. Every civilian killed creates another adversary. Such actions are a mark of failure, not success."

He declared that the Zionist regime and its supporters have chosen a self-destructive path characterized by violence and disregard for human values. "Throughout history, such behavior has led only to downfall," he said, predicting the regime's eventual collapse.

General Mousavi also highlighted the critical role of education, emphasizing that Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei has called education a "duty." He stressed the importance of integrating education with spiritual and moral values, as well as leveraging advancements in artificial intelligence and technology. "If we neglect these areas, we risk significant setbacks," he warned.

In conclusion, he called for a stronger focus on in-service training and the effective use of young talent in universities, stating, "The future lies in our ability to nurture and utilize this potential effectively."

General Mousavi reaffirmed that the ultimate outcome of ongoing struggles will be determined at the appropriate time, expressing confidence in Iran's resilience and strategic vision.

Iran Slams U.S., UK Attacks on Yemen



TEHRAN (PressTV) - A senior Iranian diplomat has condemned the latest round of airstrikes by U.S. and British warplanes against a number of sites in the Yemeni capital of Sana'a, holding Washington and London directly responsible for any "dangerous" and "unpredictable" consequences of the regional situation.

An assistant to Iran's foreign minister and the director general for the Persian Gulf Affairs in the Iranian Foreign Ministry vehemently denounced the large-scale US-British strikes on various neighborhoods of Sana'a as efforts in support of the Zionist regime's ongoing crimes in Gaza.

"The continuation of adventurous and aggressive attacks by the US-led coalition on Yemen's soil are aimed at destabilizing the region and undermining the peace and ceasefire process between the groups and countries involved in the Yemeni crisis," Mohammad Alibek said on Wednesday.

He also held the US and Britain directly responsible for any dangerous and unpredictable consequences arising from the regional situation.

"The recurrent military aggression by the United States and Britain against Yemeni territory is a clear violation of the international law and the UN Charter, and a blatant encroachment on Yemen's national sovereignty and territorial integrity," he said.

The official said all conflicts and attacks in the West Asian region are rooted in the Zionist regime's genocidal policy in Gaza, warning about the negative consequences of the regime's warmongering and provocations for regional and international peace and security.

Yemen's al-Masirah television channel reported a series of US-British aerial attacks on the Yemeni capital on Tuesday afternoon.

Two of the airstrikes hit the Defense Ministry building and other areas in downtown Sana'a, while the rest struck the 1st Armor Division and an ammunition manufacturing complex in the city center.

IRAN NEWS



Chabahar to Connect to the National Rail Network Next Year

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Ali Abdolali Zadeh, Special Representative of the President for Maritime Economy, announced plans to connect Chabahar to the national rail network by the end of 2025. He stated that for the first time, Iran is leveraging its strategic geography to establish connections between neighboring countries, from the Persian Gulf and the Oman Sea to Northern Europe. This integration will transform the corridor into two major routes, enhancing Iran's transit capacity.

"This development will elevate Iran's significance in the region, attracting foreign investment to the country," Abdolali Zadeh said. He emphasized the need for international funding to bolster transportation corridors and construct major ports along the Oman Sea and the Indian Ocean. "Makran is the gateway for Iran to join the global community through constructive international engagement," he noted.

Priority of the Fourteenth Gov't is Strengthening Relations With Neighbors



IRANNEWSNATIONALDESK

TEHRAN - In a meeting with Tajikistan's Ambassador to Iran, Zahedi Nizomidin Shamsiddinzoda, on Tuesday, Seyyed Reza Salehi Amiri, Iran's Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts, emphasized the country's commitment to expanding relations with Tajikistan. He stated, "The development of relations with neighboring countries has been a priority for the Fourteenth Government, and we are fully prepared to strengthen ties with Tajikistan."

Salehi Amiri announced plans for a presidential visit to Tajikistan, describing it as an opportunity to inaugurate a new chapter in bilateral relations.

The minister highlighted the significance of enhancing connectivity and increasing tourist exchanges between the two nations. "Despite the cultural and historical closeness of Iran and Tajikistan, the volume of travel and interaction is not significant. Appropriate agreements and planning are necessary to address this," he said.

He also noted that Tehran alone hosts over 3,000 travel agencies, which are ready to promote tourism between the two countries. The shared language, cultural ties, and positive history of cooperation between Iran and Tajikistan provide a strong foundation for this effort.

Salehi Amiri underscored Iran's policy of prioritizing neighborly relations, suggesting mutual research and restoration of historical artifacts as potential areas for collaboration.

He also proposed joint cultural events involving intellectuals and cultural figures, as well as cultural weeks to celebrate the shared heritage. Furthermore, he suggested creating a multilingual film showcasing the historical and cultural values of both nations to introduce their common civilization to the world.

Makran Should Host Global Banks



IRANNEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Mohammad Qasemi, Deputy for Economic Affairs at the Planning and Budget Organization, highlighted key points during the second meeting on globalization and development with a focus on Makran. He stated that the President emphasizes involving top-tier international consultants, particularly those with expertise in maritime studies, to conduct research on the Makran region.

Qasemi noted that while the Planning and Budget Organization has accumulated extensive experience in regional development, historical development documents show that even before the revolution, southern coastal development was a priority. However, back then, the focus was predominantly on construction, without adequate planning for essential facilities like schools and hospitals. This discrepancy was due to misaligned construction and development budgets, leading to the decision to merge the two for better outcomes.

He criticized the outdated approach of simply building cities to drive development, arguing that the current paradigm should focus on the region's role in global and regional value chains. Makran, he emphasized, must not only forge regional and global connections but also serve as a beacon of hope for Iran's future development. The region is envisioned as the hub for eastern Iran's growth, reducing risks and costs, providing access to open waters, and playing an active role in the North-South Corridor.

Qasemi outlined plans for innovative financing methods for Makran, moving away from traditional approaches. He stressed that local communities should be primary beneficiaries of this development project. The vision includes creating a city of over one million residents with robust infrastructure, constructing a coastal highway, establishing new fishing ports based on regional needs, and building two airports. He expressed hope that the region would be fully developed by 2026.

The deputy emphasized Makran's unique opportunities, stating that the President has urged the private sector to support government efforts. This includes facilitating the hiring of foreign consultants, where government resources are limited. He concluded by expressing optimism that Makran's economic potential will materialize within the next three years.



IRANNEWS ECONOMIC DESK

Iran-Pakistan Trade Opportunities Discussed

TEHRAN - The Head of Iran's Trade Promotion Organization (TPO), alongside senior officials, emphasized strengthening trade ties with Pakistan during a meeting focused on export opportunities in sectors such as oil, gas, petrochemicals, polymers, and plastics.

In the event held at Tehran's International Permanent Fairground, Mohammad Ali Dehghan Dehnavi, Head of the TPO, underscored Iran's commitment to enhancing trade relations with Pakistan. He highlighted the close ties between the two nations but acknowledged that economic cooperation has yet to reach its full potential.

"Strengthening trade with Pakistan, as a neighboring and economic partner, is a priority for us," Dehnavi stated. "However, we need to address existing barriers through mutual engagement to realize this goal."

He added that the Ministry of Industry, Mine, and Trade (MIMT), particularly the TPO, is keen on expanding bilateral trade. This includes not only increasing Iranian exports to Pakistan but also meeting part of Iran's domestic needs through imports from Pakistan. "Economic and trade connections can thrive under such mutual cooperation," he said.

Dehnavi described the ongoing negotiations on a trade agreement between the two countries as a vital platform for advancing these objectives. Expressing full support for Iranian producers and traders interested in operating in Pakistan, he emphasized the need to actively explore trade opportunities and identify goods that can serve as a foundation for strengthening bilateral ties.

Highlighting exhibitions as a crucial tool for trade promotion, Dehnavi mentioned a successful Iranian exhibition focused on petrochemical and oil-related industries held in Pakistan. "We hope this year's edition will also be impactful, providing an excellent platform to identify export opportunities," he remarked.

The TPO, he assured, will continue to support Iranian businesses and economic stakeholders seeking to expand their trade relations in Pakistan. He stressed the importance of accompanying exhibitions with effective business-to-business (B2B) meetings to maximize their impact. "Before participating in exhibitions, a comprehensive list of Iranian and Pakistani companies should be exchanged between trade delegations," Dehnavi noted. The TPO, he said, is committed to assisting exhibition organizers in achieving this goal.

This meeting, attended by Pakistani Commercial Counselor Amer Hussain and representatives from the public and private sectors, reflects the growing focus on fostering economic collaboration between the two nations.

Meanwhile the Trade and Investment Counselor of Pakistan in Iran emphasized the expanding trade relations between the two nations during a meeting on export opportunities in the oil, gas, petrochemical, polymer, and plastics sectors. He announced that trade between Iran and Pakistan has doubled over the past three years and expressed hopes of increasing this figure to \$10 billion by 2030.

Amir Hussain made these remarks at the meeting. Highlighting the vast potential for bilateral cooperation, he noted opportunities in energy and other sectors.

Referring to the 900-kilometer shared border and joint coastal areas between

Iran and Pakistan, Hussain stated that many economic players in both countries are unaware of the broad opportunities available. While Iranians primarily recognize Pakistan for its rice production, the counselor pointed out that Pakistan is also active in pharmaceuticals, textiles, leather, and other industries.

He attributed this lack of awareness to inadequate follow-up on trade negotiations between the two nations. Hussain stressed the importance of trade events to create better opportunities for dialogue and collaboration.

Hussain highlighted that marketing has been a neglected aspect of Iran-Pakistan trade relations, leading to the underrepresentation of Pakistani products in the Iranian market. He expressed optimism that these challenges would soon be resolved.

Concluding his remarks, Hussain expressed hope for upcoming Pakistani exhibitions in Iran showcasing sectors like textiles, leather, and pharmaceuticals. He reiterated the satisfaction with the recent growth in trade relations and underscored Pakistan's commitment to reaching the ambitious \$10 billion trade target by 2030. Specialized trade events in both countries, he added, will play a vital role in achieving this goal.

In the meeting, Deputy of the Trade Development Organization Mohammad Sadeq Qanadzadeh highlighted strategic plans to expand trade ties between Iran and Pakistan, stating:

"A roadmap to enhance trade exchanges between the two countries has been signed. Our initial target is to achieve \$5 billion in trade exchanges, with a long-term goal of reaching \$10 billion."

Qanadzadeh emphasized Iran's competitive edge in the petrochemical sector, describing it as one of the country's significant export advantages. He noted: "Pakistan is among the countries where we actively participate in international events. To strengthen our presence, we are planning exclusive exhibitions there to showcase Iran's economic capabilities to our neighboring country."

He added: "Currently, there is a strong intent to develop trade relations between Iran and Pakistan. However, Iran's share of Pakistan's petrochemical market is small. Pakistan imports over \$13 billion worth of petrochemical products annually, but Iran's share is approximately \$700 million. Through this event, we aim to increase Iran's market share and comprehensively demonstrate our capabilities in this sector."

Qanadzadeh stated that Iran is working on innovative approaches to establish a foothold in Pakistan's oil, gas, and petrochemical markets. He explained: "We aim to organize a specialized event in Pakistan, going beyond a traditional exhibition. This comprehensive event package for the petrochemical sector has been fully designed."

As part of the initiative, exclusive visits for Iranian companies in Pakistan and B2B meetings have been planned to facilitate trade agreements and initiate commercial exchanges.

The Deputy of the Trade Development Organization announced the start of the fifth round of negotiations for a free trade agreement between Iran and Pakistan, adding:

"This development will enhance our trade capacities with Pakistan."

No Exports of Technical and Engineering Services to Syria

TEHRAN - Ali Naqavi, head of the Technical and Engineering Services Commission at the Iran Chamber of Commerce, detailed the latest developments in Iran's export of technical and engineering services. He emphasized that despite the country's significant potential in this sector, actual exports fall drastically short.

Naqavi noted that the total value of these exports may not exceed \$1 billion annually, even though Iran could easily increase this figure to \$15 billion within two years. He compared Iran's capabilities to Turkey, stating that Iranian companies outperform Turkish firms in construction and infrastructure projects, including power lines, water pipelines, and water treatment facilities. Despite this, Turkish firms exported \$60 billion worth of technical and engineering services in 2022, second only to China.

Naqavi lamented that Iran's export of technical and engineering services is nearly non-existent. Whatever exports occur are driven by individual companies operating without institutional support. These companies primarily work in Central Asian and East African countries, such as Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. He proposed establishing a support structure under the President's office to facilitate these exports.

One of the main obstacles to exporting technical services is the issue of bank guarantees. Naqavi explained that while some countries, like Oman, have bilateral agreements with Iran to address this issue, Iranian companies still face barriers in more than 90% of potential markets.

Naqavi highlighted fundamental differences between exporting goods and technical services. Unlike goods, service exports are long-



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

term projects, sometimes spanning five years. Political instability can severely disrupt service exports. He stressed the importance of stable diplomatic relations between Iran and destination countries for the success of such exports.

Solving the FATF issue, Naqavi said, could resolve many challenges in exporting technical and engineering services by standardizing Iran's international interactions. He also pointed out that Iran, as a major shareholder in the Islamic Development Bank, has an opportunity to benefit

from projects initiated by the bank in member countries. Plans are underway to invite the bank's officials to Iran for discussions.

Naqavi announced the first international event on exporting technical and engineering services, scheduled for May next year in Tehran. He expressed hopes to explore how Iranian companies could participate in projects funded by the Islamic Development Bank.

Responding to questions about why Iran has not advanced its service exports with politically friendly countries, Naqavi revealed that Iran lacks a presence in the Russian market due to Russia's preference for local contractors. Additionally, exporting services requires clients with adequate budgets, which countries like Afghanistan lack.

Naqavi confirmed that Iran has not exported any technical or engineering services to Syria. In the Gulf region, some opportunities exist in Oman, but other nations, such as the UAE and Qatar, prefer European and American contractors due to their strong influence.

Energy Imbalance Crisis in Iran



IRANNEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - In a report published by the Iranian Government Information Center, Mohsen Paknejad, the Oil Minister, highlighted the challenges of energy imbalances in the country during a meeting with the Women's Parliamentary Caucus.

Paknejad stated that energy imbalance has become a pressing concern for citizens. He emphasized that this issue, along with its consequences and potential solutions, was a key topic during a recent high-level meeting involving the heads of Iran's three branches of government.

He revealed that over 860 million cubic meters of natural gas are supplied daily to the national grid, with a significant portion consumed by households, commercial entities, and minor industries. In colder months, daily household consumption has peaked at 670 million cubic meters.

Paknejad criticized the inefficiency of gas usage in homes, where significant amounts of energy are wasted due to low-performance gas heaters. He stressed the need to focus on both increasing production and managing demand to address the imbalance effectively.

The Oil Minister explained that Iran is investing billions of dollars to expand gas field operations and increase production. However, without proper consumption management, these efforts alone will not resolve the energy deficit.

He advocated prioritizing demand management and energy optimization over merely increasing production. Legal frameworks under the seventh national development plan provide opportunities for improvement, which the government aims to leverage in collaboration with the public.

Paknejad noted the effectiveness of the "Two Degrees Cooler" campaign in reducing gas consumption. This initiative helped save 30 to 35 million cubic meters of gas daily during peak demand, maintaining stability in the gas supply network.

Addressing the reliance on alternative fuels, Paknejad stated that power plants must switch to liquid fuels like diesel and heavy fuel oil when gas supplies are constrained. The average diesel supply to power plants increased from 35 million liters per day last year to over 50 million liters per day.

He assured that the Ministry of Oil is fully committed to ensuring sufficient fuel supply, despite the rising energy demand.

Paknejad stressed the need for a \$45 billion investment in the gas sector to achieve the seventh development plan's goal of producing 1.38 billion cubic meters of gas daily. He also emphasized the importance of implementing the South Pars pressure-boosting project to prevent the loss of 25 million cubic meters of gas annually from this joint field.

The minister proposed using filters in power plant chimneys as a solution to reduce air pollution, a method adopted by advanced nations that use coal without significant environmental harm.

27 Million Active Workforce in the Country



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The latest results from Iran's Statistical Center's labor force survey for the summer of 2024 show that the total active population aged 15 and older is 27.1 million people. Of this number, 25.1 million are employed, while 2 million are unemployed.

The economic participation rate for the population aged 15 and older during the summer season stands at 41.7%. This rate varies across urban and rural areas, with 41.3% in cities and 42.8% in rural areas. It also differs by gender, with 68.8% of men and 14.6% of women participating in the workforce. Additionally, the breakdown of employed individuals in various sectors shows that 52.1% work in services, 33.3% in industry, and 14.5% in agriculture.

The overall unemployment rate for individuals aged 15 and older is 7.5%, marking a 0.4% decrease compared to last summer. The unemployment rate for men is 6.1%, while for women it stands at 14.2%.

Furthermore, the youth unemployment rate for individuals aged 18 to 35 is 14.8%, showing a slight decrease of 0.2% compared to last summer. The unemployment rate in urban areas is 15.6%, while in rural areas, it is 11.6%.

Ivory Coast President Says French Forces to Withdraw

ABIDJAN (Dispatches) - Ivory Coast President Alassane Ouattara said that French forces would withdraw from the West African nation, continuing the former colonial power's military exit from the region. Speaking in an end-of-year address to the nation, Ouattara said Ivorians should be proud of the modernised state of their own armed forces.

"In this context, we have decided on the coordinated and organised withdrawal of French forces," he said. France has been considering reducing its military presence in West and Central African countries, including Ivory Coast, to 600 troops from around 2,200 now, sources told Reuters in November.



Barrage of Russian Missiles and Drones in Ukraine



MOSCOW (Dispatches) - Russia launched an aerial attack on Ukraine on Tuesday, striking the capital and other regions with multiple missiles and drones. Ukraine's air force reported a ballistic missile threat at 3:00 a.m. (0100 GMT), with at least two explosions heard in Kyiv minutes later. Another missile alert was issued at 8:00 a.m. followed by at least one explosion in the city. Missile debris fell in the Darnytskyi district of the capital with no reports of casualties or damage, the local administration said.

Authorities in the northeastern Sumy region reported strikes near the city of Shostka, where the mayor, Mykola Noha, said 12 residential buildings had been damaged as well as two educational facilities. He said some "social infrastructure objects" were destroyed, without providing detail.

The air force also reported missiles and drones targeting several other regions of Ukraine.

In Moscow, the Russian Defense Ministry said that its forces successfully struck a Ukrainian air base and a gunpowder factory.

Around half of Ukraine's energy infrastructure has been destroyed during the war, and rolling electricity blackouts are common and widespread.

Kyiv's Western allies have provided air defense systems to help Ukraine protect critical infrastructure, but Russia has sought to overwhelm its air defenses with combined strikes involving large numbers of missiles and drones.

Russian attacks come as uncertainty looms over the course of the nearly three-year conflict. U.S. President-elect Donald Trump, who takes office next month, has vowed to end the war and has thrown into doubt whether vital U.S. military support for Kyiv will continue.

On Monday, President Joe Biden announced that the United States will send an additional \$2.5 billion in weapons to Ukraine as his administration works quickly to spend all the money it has available to help Kyiv fight off Russia before Trump takes office.

Ukraine has struck back at Russia with a steady barrage of missile and drone attacks throughout the year.

South Korea Crash Investigation Ramps Up as Funeral Procedures Begin



SEOUL (Dispatches) - The investigation into the crash of a South Korea passenger jet gathered pace on Wednesday as bereaved families began to prepare funerals after authorities finished formally identifying the 179 victims of the country's worst air disaster.

The transport ministry said South Korean investigators have extracted the data from the plane's cockpit voice recorder and will convert it into an audio file, critical information to try to explain the few minutes that led up to the crash.

The investigation team is still working to extract the contents of the flight data recorder, which was found missing a key connector, the ministry said.

All 175 passengers and four of the six crew members were killed on Sunday when the Jeju Air jet belly-landed at Muan International Airport in the country's southwest and slammed into a sand-and-concrete embankment at the end of the runway, where it burst into flames.

Two crew members, located near the tail of the Boeing 737-800, survived the disaster.

The government has declared a national mourning period until Jan. 4 and the country will scale back New Year's celebrations.

The transport ministry said two more U.S. officials arrived late on Tuesday to join a team of around two dozen investigators including from the U.S. National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), Federal Aviation Administration, and aircraft maker Boeing.

Revellers Across the World Welcome 2025 With Spectacular Fireworks



LONDON (Dispatches) - From Sydney to Vladivostok to Mumbai, communities around the world have begun welcoming 2025 with spectacular light shows, embraces and ice plunges.

Auckland became the first major city to celebrate, as thousands thronged downtown or climbed the city's ring of volcanic peaks for a fireworks vantage point. A light display recognized Indigenous people.

Countries in the South Pacific Ocean are the first to ring in the New Year, with midnight in New Zealand striking 18 hours before the ball drop in Times Square in New York.

Conflict muted acknowledgements of the new year in places like the Middle East, Sudan and Ukraine.

Fireworks blasted off the Sydney Harbor Bridge and across the bay. More than a million Australians and others gathered at iconic Sydney Harbor for the celebration. British pop star Robbie Williams led a singalong with the crowd.

The celebration also featured Indigenous ceremonies and performances that acknowledged the land's first people.

Much of Japan shut down ahead of the nation's biggest holiday, as temples and homes underwent a thorough cleaning.

The upcoming Year of the Snake in the Asian zodiac is heralded as one of rebirth — alluding to the reptile's shedding skin.

Stores in Japan, which observes the zodiac cycle from Jan. 1, have been selling snake-themed products. Other places in Asia will mark the Year of the Snake later with the Lunar New Year.

In South Korea, celebrations were cut back or canceled during a period of national mourning following the Sunday crash of a Jeju Air flight at Muan that killed 179 people.

In Thailand's Bangkok, shopping malls competed for crowds with live musical acts and fireworks shows. A performance by popular rap singer Lisa, the Thai member of the South Korean girl group Blackpink, was scheduled just before midnight.

A fireworks display in Indonesia's Jakarta featured 800 drones.

Chinese state media covered an exchange of New Year's greetings between leader Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin in a reminder of growing closeness between the leaders who face tensions with the West.

Xi told Putin their countries will "always move forward hand in hand," the official Xinhua News Agency said.

China has maintained ties and robust trade with Russia since the latter invaded Ukraine in 2022, helping to offset Western sanctions and attempts to isolate Putin.

Xi also addressed Taiwan, the self-ruled island claimed by Beijing: "We Chinese on both sides of the Taiwan Strait belong to one and the same family. No one can ever sever the bond of kinship between us."

In his address to the nation, Putin said Russia has "set big goals for ourselves and achieved them, and we overcame difficulties more than once because we were together."

In India, thousands of revelers in the financial hub of Mumbai flocked to the city's bustling promenade facing the Arabian Sea.

And in Dubai, thousands are attending a fireworks show at the Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest skyscraper.

Rome's traditional New Year's Eve festivities have an additional draw: the start of Pope Francis' Holy Year, the once-every-quarter-century celebration projected to bring some 32 million pilgrims to the Eternal City in 2025.

On Tuesday, Francis will celebrate a vespers at St. Peter's Basilica, followed by Mass on Wednesday, when he is expected to again appeal for peace amid wars in Ukraine and the Middle East.

Jan. 1 is a day of obligation for Catholics, marking the Solemnity of Mary.

Paris will cap a momentous 2024 with its traditional countdown and fireworks extravaganza on the Champs-Élysées.

The Summer Olympics and Paralympic Games hosted in the French capital from July to September transformed the city into a site of joy, fraternity and astonishing sporting achievements. It also marked a milestone in its recovery from deadly extremist attacks in 2015 by al-Qaida and the Islamic State group.

Frank and Rowena Klar from San Francisco visited the French capital to celebrate 31 years together. "If you start it big, we think we're going to have a great year," he said.

London was due to ring in the New Year with a pyrotechnic display along the River Thames. With a storm bringing bitter weather to other parts of the United Kingdom, however, festivities in Edinburgh, Scotland, were canceled.

But in Switzerland and some other places people embraced the cold, stripping and plunging into the water in freezing temperatures.

Rio de Janeiro will throw Brazil's main New Year's Eve bash on Copacabana Beach, with ferries offshore bearing 12 straight minutes of fireworks. Thousands of tourists in cruise ships will witness the show up close.

More than 2 million people were expected at the Copacabana, hoping to squeeze into concerts by superstar Brazilian artists such as pop singer Anitta and Grammy-award winner Caetano Veloso.

In New York City, the organization managing Times Square has tested its famous ball drop and inspected 2025 numerals, lights and thousands of crystals as part of a tradition going back to 1907. This year's celebration will include musical performances by TLC, Jonas Brothers, Rita Ora and Sophie Ellis-Bextor.

Meanwhile, Las Vegas' pyrotechnic show will be on the Strip, with 340,000 people anticipated as fireworks are launched from the rooftops of casinos. Nearby, the massive Sphere venue will display for the first time countdowns to midnight in different time zones.

In Pasadena, enthusiastic Rose Parade spectators were camping out and hoping for prime spots. And some 200,000 people were flocking to a party in Nashville, Tennessee, featuring a show by some of country music's biggest stars.

American Samoa will be among the last to welcome 2025, a full 24 hours after New Zealand.

Europe Ends Imports of Russian Gas Via Ukraine on January 1



PARIS (Dispatches) - Russia's once-dominant gas supply to Europe via Ukraine, which flowed for decades, ended on New Year's Day with the collapse of a contract between the two warring countries that paid out billions to Moscow in gas revenue and to Kyiv in transit fees.

The shutdown of Russia's oldest gas route to Europe ends a decade of fraught relations sparked by Russia's seizure of Crimea in 2014.

The European Union redoubled its efforts to reduce its dependence on Russian energy after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022 by seeking alternative sources.

Liquefied natural gas (LNG) from Qatar and United States has helped the EU find alternative supply. Piped supply has come from Norway.

The change was clear last year as Russian state-controlled gas exporter Gazprom recorded a \$7 billion loss, its first since 1999, despite its efforts to boost exports to new buyer China.

The remaining buyers of Russian gas via Ukraine such as Slovakia and Austria have also arranged alternative supply.

A spokesperson for Austria's energy ministry said on Tuesday that due to purchases made via Italy and Germany and the filling of storage, supply for consumers was guaranteed.

Slovakia will also not risk a shortage, though now faces an extra 177 million euros (\$184 million) in fees for alternative routes, its Economy Ministry said.

A European Commission spokeswoman said EU preparations had included energy efficiency measures, renewable energy development and a flexible gas system.

"The European gas infrastructure is flexible enough to provide gas of non-Russian origin to Central and Eastern Europe via alternative routes. It has been reinforced with significant new LNG import capacities since 2022," said Anna-Kaisa Itkonen.

Analysts foresee minimal market impact from the stoppage which was confirmed on Tuesday as data from Ukraine's gas transit operator showed Russia had not requested any gas flows for Jan. 1 through the Ukrainian pipeline to Europe as of 1700 GMT.

They say the end of the transit deal is unlikely to cause a repeat of the 2022

EU gas price rally as the remaining volumes are relatively small.

The gas market showed little reaction on Tuesday, with European benchmark gas prices ending at 48.50 euros per megawatt hour, up only marginally on the day.

Despite the EU's progress in replacing Russian supply via Ukraine, Europe has felt the impact, with higher energy costs hitting its industrial competitiveness versus the United States and China, for example.

That has contributed to a major economic slowdown, a spike in inflation and has worsened a cost-of-living crisis.

Ukraine now faces the loss of some \$800 million a year in transit fees from Russia, while Gazprom will lose close to \$5 billion in gas sales.

Moldova, once part of the Soviet Union, is among the countries worst affected. It says it will now need to introduce measures to reduce its gas use by a third.

Russia and the former Soviet Union spent half a century building up a major share of the European gas market, which at its peak stood at around 35%, but the war in Ukraine has all but destroyed that business for Gazprom.

The Yamal-Europe pipeline via Belarus has also shut and the Nord Stream route across the Baltic Sea to Germany was blown up in 2022.

Combined, the various routes delivered a record high 201 billion cubic metres (bcm) of gas to Europe in 2018.

Calling Snap Elections Created More Instability for France

PARIS (Dispatches) - French President Emmanuel Macron said he recognized that his decision to call early parliamentary elections in June had created more political instability in the country, in a rare moment of contrition.

The speech caps a tumultuous 2024 for Macron, who shocked the nation halfway through the year by calling early elections, a gamble that backfired when voters delivered a hung parliament with a big increase in far-right lawmakers, diluting Macron's power.

"Lucidity and humility force (me) to recognise that at this stage, this decision has produced more instability than peace, and I fully own up to that," Macron said in a televised address ahead of New Year celebrations.

"The dissolution caused more divisions in the Assembly than solutions for the French people," he added, in the clearest mea culpa yet since the elections.

Macron had justified his decision to call early elections in the wake of a bad score at European elections by the need to "clarify" the political situation.



But he lost his workable majority and took two months to name a minority government, which eventually collapsed in December, the first time that happened in France since 1962.

As a result, France failed to approve a budget for 2025 before the end-of-year deadline, and Macron had to name his fourth prime minister this year, centrist veteran François Bayrou, in December.

Macron also opened the door to use referendums this year, without using the word, saying he would ask the French to decide on "decisive" issues, without elaborating which ones.

The French constitution grants powers to the president to initiate referendums.

Macron has also used "citizen conventions", gatherings of randomly picked citizens without any binding power, in the past to quell revolts such as the yellow vest rebellion on certain issues.



Gilgeous-Alexander, Thunder Top Wolves for 12th Straight Win

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 40 points to lead the Oklahoma City Thunder to their 12th consecutive victory, a 113-105 decision over the visiting Minnesota Timberwolves.

The streak is the Thunder's longest since early in the 2012-13 season and ties the longest run since the franchise moved to Oklahoma City. The club's all-time mark is a 12-game streak by the 1995-96 Seattle SuperSonics.

After a slow start, Isaiah Hartenstein finished with 15 points and 10 rebounds for Oklahoma City. Luguentz Dort and Jalen Williams each had 14 points and seven rebounds, and Williams added seven assists.

Anthony Edwards scored 13 of his 20 points in the second quarter for the Timberwolves, whose three-game winning streak was snapped. Naz Reid produced 19 points and eight rebounds, Mike Conley scored 16 points, Julius Randle logged 11 points and six assists, and Donte DiVincenzo had 10 points and five assists.

After trailing by 14 heading into the fourth, the Timberwolves twice cut the deficit to three in the final 3:14, but each time, Oklahoma City responded.

The last came with just less than two minutes remaining when Williams flung the ball from under the basket to Gilgeous-Alexander near the top of the key for a 3-pointer to give the Thunder a six-point lead with 1:48 to go.

It was Gilgeous-Alexander's fourth 40-point game of the season. Three of those contests were during Oklahoma City's current winning streak.

As the clock ticked down in what had already been a dominant third quarter for the Thunder, Gilgeous-Alexander drove to the bucket, scooping the ball to the rim where it hung for a moment or two before falling through as the home crowd erupted.

It was Gilgeous-Alexander's seventh field goal of the quarter, giving him 19 points in the frame.

The Timberwolves turned the ball over 11 times in the third, leading to 20 of Oklahoma City's 43 points in the quarter.

The Thunder finished with 31 points off Minnesota's season-high 24 turnovers. Oklahoma City gave the ball away 13 times, leading to 10 points.

For much of the first half, the Timberwolves set the tone on defense, making it difficult for Oklahoma City to consistently get to the basket as the Thunder shot 39.6 percent from the field before the break.

Minnesota led 52-46 at halftime, but a 43-23 advantage for Oklahoma City in the third quarter turned the game around.

Meanwhile Jarrett Allen scored a season-high 27 points and grabbed 14 rebounds as the Cleveland Cavaliers led nearly wire to wire en route to their eighth straight win, a 122-110 decision against the host Los Angeles Lakers.

Donovan Mitchell added 26 points for the Cavaliers, who were playing the second game of a back-to-back set.

The Cavaliers came out hot, building a 15-point lead midway through the first quarter. Los Angeles rallied briefly to take a lead in the second quarter, but it was all Cleveland for most of the night.

Allen shot 12-for-14 from the floor to key the Cavaliers' interior scoring, while Mitchell's 6-of-13 3-point shooting paced Cleveland to an 18-for-46 night (39.1 percent) from long range.

Max Strus, who scored 15 points off the Cavaliers' bench, hit 4 of 8 from deep, with three of his treys coming during a pivotal stretch lasting 2:09 in the third quarter. Strus' three 3-pointers and another from Darius Garland, who finished with 14 points, fueled a 12-2 Cleveland run.

Kyrgios Unsure of Fitness for Australian Open



LONDON (Dispatches) - Nick Kyrgios said he was unsure about his readiness for the Australian Open after his first singles match in 18 months left him in pain.

Kyrgios is set to play in the year's first Grand Slam with a protected ranking of 21st. The 29-year-old has not featured in a major since 2022 due to knee, foot and wrist injuries.

The Australian lost 7-6(2) 6-7(4) 7-6(3) to Giovanni Mpetshi Perricard in a clash of big servers at the Brisbane International on Tuesday, which was Kyrgios' first tour-level singles match since wrist surgery in September 2023.

"After today I'm super excited for the Australian Open. If I'm able to play, I'm able to play. But the reality kind of set in for me," he said.

"That's a best-of-three match with my wrist. If I'm able to (play) not only is a Grand Slam mentally really draining, it's physically a grind.

"I think I almost need a miracle and I need, like, the stars to align for my wrist to hold up in a Grand Slam for sure."

Kyrgios partnered former rival Novak Djokovic in their debut as a doubles team on Monday, riding a wave of support to secure a 6-4 6-7(4) (10-8) win over Alexander Erler and Andreas Mies.

"I felt like I had been hit by a bus yesterday after doubles, to be honest. I was on the treatment table for an hour and a half before bed," Kyrgios added.

"I think tomorrow it's going to be a bit of a rough day for my wrist... It's very sore at the moment. I'm going to do all the right things, and I'll be playing doubles, for sure."

Djokovic Dominates in Brisbane

BRISBANE (Dispatches) - The United States swept Croatia in Perth and Italy did the same to France in Sydney to reach the quarterfinals of the United Cup in Australia.

Taylor Fritz defeated Croatia's Borna Coric 6-3, 6-2 and Coco Gauff scored a 6-4, 6-2 victory over Donna Vekic in singles. Fritz and Gauff completed the 3-0 win in Group A with a 6-2, 6-3 defeat of Petra Marcinko and Ivan Dodig in mixed doubles, setting up a meeting with China.

In Group D, Italy's Flavio Cobolli saved a match point in a 3-6, 7-6 (8), 6-2 win against France's Ugo Humbert and Jasmine Paolini sailed to a 6-0, 6-2 defeat of Chloe Paquet in singles. Sara Errani and Andrea Vavassori posted a 6-3, 7-6 (3) win in mixed doubles over Elixane Lechemia and Edouard Roger-Vasselin.

Top-seeded Novak Djokovic of Serbia collected his first ATP Tour singles win since October with a 6-3, 6-3 defeat of home hopeful Rinky Hijikata in Australia.

Djokovic, 37, fired 12 aces and never faced a break point in the 75-minute win to set up a second-round meeting with Gael Monfils. Djokovic is 19-0 lifetime against the Frenchman.

No. 4 seed Frances Tiafoe ousted Australia's Adam Walton 7-6 (5), 6-3 and Italy's Matteo Arnaldi posted a 6-3, 6-2 upset of seventh-



seeded Aussie Alexei Popyrin. Other winners included Serbia's Dusan Lajovic, Jakub Mensik of the Czech Republic, Reilly Opelka and France's Giovanni Mpetshi Perricard.

Fifth-seeded Nuno Borges of Portugal rallied for a 3-6, 6-3, 7-6 (6) win over China's Yunchaokete Bu in a first-round match that lasted 2 hours and 14 minutes.

No. 7 Pedro Martinez of Spain, the only other seeded player in action, took down Italian qualifier Francesco Passaro 6-4, 6-4.

Others advancing to the second round in Hong Kong included Belgian wild card Zizou Bergs, Canada's Gabriel Diallo, France's

Alexandre Muller, Spain's Jaume Munar, Japan's Kei Nishikori and China's Junheng Shang.

Top-seeded Madison Keys recorded four aces in a 6-4, 6-4 victory over Lucia Bronzetti of Italy to advance to the second round of the ASB Classic in Auckland, New Zealand.

Third-seeded Amanda Anisimova was not as fortunate. Alycia Parks fired nine aces and overcame 11 double faults to rally to a 2-6, 6-2, 6-3 win over Anisimova in a match that lasted just over 2 hours.

Also, former U.S. Open champion Emma Raducanu (back) of Great Britain and second-seeded Elise Mertens (ankle) of Belgium withdrew from the tournament due to their respective injuries.

Raducanu was replaced by Japan's Mai Hontama, who dropped a 6-3, 2-6, 6-0 decision to Robin Montgomery. Mertens was replaced by Brit Jordie Burrage, who notched a 6-3, 6-3 win over New Zealand wild card Vivian Yang.

Meanwhile Gabriela Dabrowski, a WTA doubles star, reportedly competed and thrived while undergoing breast cancer treatments in 2024.

New Milan Coach Conceicao Targets Top Four Finish

MILAN (Dispatches) - AC Milan's new manager Sergio Conceicao has targeted a Champions League qualifying spot after a disappointing start to the season has left them eighth in Serie A outside the European places.

The Portuguese was appointed Milan manager on Monday after compatriot Paulo Fonseca was sacked following six months in charge due to the team's inconsistent run of form.

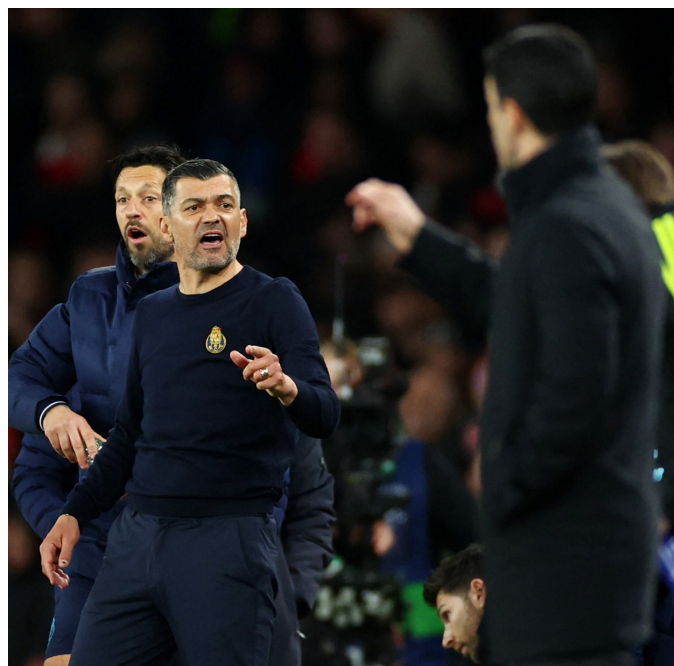
Conceicao will depart with his players for Saudi Arabia and his first game in charge when Milan take on Juventus in the Italian Super Cup semi-final in Riyadh on Friday. Inter Milan face Atalanta in the other semi on Thursday.

But the main target is the top four and a qualifying place in Europe's elite club competition, which they have won seven times. They are 12th in this season's 32-team Champions League table among the seeded playoff spots.

"We all want one thing: for Milan to return to the Champions League. We are Milan," Conceicao said at his first Milan press conference on Tuesday.

"If I'm here, it's not a good sign - it means something didn't go well. There's not much time to prepare for the match against Juventus. We don't complain and we don't make excuses."

Milan have 27 points from 17 games, eight points adrift of the top four and five behind sixth-placed Juve, who currently occupy the final European qualifying spot.



Conceicao reflected on the challenges ahead and said he expected the players to give their all to the cause.

"There will always be 11 players who are happy and others less so. But they all need to give their maximum, that is the standard," he said. "Pressure is part of football, especially at a big club like Milan."

The 50-year-old declined to discuss the January transfer window, focusing instead on becoming familiar with his squad.

"I want to know the players, from the seniors to the youth. It's not fair to speak about the market before that," he said.

Senior adviser at Milan Zlatan Ibrahimovic, who had several spells playing for the club, spoke before Conceicao's presser to reflect on Fonseca's short spell in charge.

"Before we begin with Conceicao, I want to thank Fonseca for what he has done and for the professional that he is," the former Sweden striker said.

"But he wasn't able to achieve consistency in results and when you're at Milan results are decisive."

Ibrahimovic acknowledged Fonseca should not have had to face the media after the 1-1 draw at home to AS Roma on Dec. 29 when the Portuguese said he had not heard about his sacking.

Melbourne Defeat Brings Fresh Calls for Rohit, Kohli to Exit Test Arena



NEW DELHI (Dispatches) - Speculation that India captain Rohit Sharma and batting stalwart Virat Kohli are set to call time on their test careers has snowballed as the veteran pair continue to struggle in the five-test series in Australia.

India, who won their last two test tours in Australia, went 2-1 down in the series after their stunning defeat in Melbourne on Monday, with the hosts needing only a draw in Sydney to reclaim the Border-Gavaskar Trophy (BGT).

Opener Rohit has just one fifty and 10 single-digit scores in his last 15 test innings, and even a move down the order failed to pay dividends for the 37-year-old.

Under his captaincy, India have lost five tests this season, equalling their unwanted record from 1999-2000 under Sachin Tendulkar.

Kohli, one of the greats of the modern game, has not fared much better.

The 36-year-old struck a century in the opening test in Perth but had a wretched season overall with nine single-digit scores in 17 innings this test season.

Both New Zealand and Australia have exploited his vulnerability to left-arm spin and outside the off-stump line, rendering him a walking wicket at times.

"Is it time to take a call on seniors Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli?" the Hindustan Times newspaper asked on its front page after the defeat in Melbourne, where India lost seven wickets after tea on day five.

That sentiment was echoed among fans in the cricket-mad country where Rohit and Kohli are practically worshipped, with the term "happy retirement" trending on Monday.

Both players quit Twenty20 Internationals immediately after guiding India to their second 20-overs World Cup title in June. "Is the Rohit-Kohli retirement announcement round the corner?" asked the Indian Express.

"The curtain is beginning to slide down from above; will they give themselves one more test at Sydney with BGT still open and out there for the taking or...?"

The Times of India called for an immediate changing of the guard, saying the senior batters were "in danger of being termed as liabilities".

The Melbourne defeat not only dented India's chances of retaining the Border-Gavaskar Trophy, it effectively ended their hopes of reaching the World Test Championship final for the third time in a row.

Former India captain Sunil Gavaskar said another failure in Sydney could prompt Rohit to quit test cricket and that India should draft in new faces for their England tour next year.

"The next cycle of the World Test Championship will be the cycle for 2027. You should see new faces for that," Gavaskar told Sports Tak.